

The Last Unicorn: Death and the Legacy of Fantasy

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really got me making an hour-long video essay about mortality in a 1980s children's movie about unicorns, huh?

[00:00](#) – Intro

[05:16](#) - Making the Unicorn

[14:54](#) - Story Breakdown

[24:20](#) - Memento Mori

[37:09](#) - Deaths and Legacies

[47:52](#) - Outro I

did a super bad job of explaining the whole "on 2s" thing so uhhh no worries if you're confused by how i explained it. anyway, here is a list of the sources i used for this video; next time i think i'll try to add in-video footnotes or something:

- "The Unicorn" by Nancy Hathaway
- "The Anti-Consolation: Boethius and 'The Last Unicorn'" by Alexandra Hennessey Olsen
- "'Two Sides of the Same Magic': The Dialect of Mortality and Immortality in Peter S. Beagle's The Last Unicorn by Geoffrey Reiter
- "Humankind and Reality: Illusion and Self-Deception in Peter S. Beagle's Fiction" by Richard C. West
- "Innocence and Experience and the Imagination in the World of Peter Beagle" by John Pennington
- "Fantasy and Medieval Iconography in The Last Unicorn" by Noelle Taberham
- "Virgin Whore" by Emma Maggie Solberg
- "The Unicorn Tapestries" by the Metropolitan Museum of Art
- The Last Unicorn Book vs Movie <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=La4Ps...>

Transcript

wow [Music]

the last unicorn is a movie that makes many people uncomfortable even for a 1980s family film released two years before the dawn of pg-13 is a rating it sticks with a lot of people as a particularly dark maybe even traumatizing movie along with movies like the dark crystal is a shining example of the complaint that back in my day kids movies weren't afraid to be weird and scary despite being regarded by some as reagan-era nightmare fuel the last unicorn has become somewhat of a cult classic it's not exactly comparable to the fairy tales of old which teach children how to behave by using gruesome punishments rather it demonstrates how a person comes to terms with their own mortality and how death isn't necessarily a good or bad thing but how mortality does underscore lasting legends and the art that they inspire the last unicorn in my view might come across as dark because of its scary imagery but ultimately it provides a compelling demonstration of why human mortality is such an important component of our experiences and cultures but before i talk about these serious themes let's take a look at the past few years in particular i want to talk about the explosion of the unicorn trend a trend that by now has mostly fizzled out after several years of intensity especially in kids products part of the reason i think the last unicorn comes off as so dark and scary to people is because unicorns especially now are generally associated with safety and comfort in a 2017 interview with lifestyle website refinery29 brand strategist jess weiner had this to say about the unicorn frenzy sweeping across social media we're surrounded by culture and politics that are very bleak and dark and oppressive unicorns are rare they're powerful and they're imaginary so they're capable of anything and they do have a certain girly undertone because

many of us associate them with our childhood so they're unapologetically feminine why wouldn't we own something that's just for us and inspires us to believe in our other worldly capabilities this article was published just one month after starbucks had dropped its now infamous unicorn frappuccino which looked and tasted like a jar of sand art according to google trends search queries around the word unicorn exploded during this time and before we knew it america was plunged into a rainbow sprinkle abyss this is especially true a packaged snack food i guess a lot of food companies decided to drop the shaky appeal to the great source of fiber messaging to instead bulk by unicorn molds and pink food dye and start selling us on a whole new whimsical assortment of the same things we've been eating all along

[Music]

unicorns also became ubiquitous in the online beauty and fashion world paving the way for the mermaid witch and crystal trends that would follow in the coming years in 2017 the same year starbucks released its sour glitter drink to sticky cup holders everywhere wet and wild released a unicorn collection of cosmetics tart released their unicorn brushes with handles shaped like spiral horns and by selling it at 54. per 10 milliliter bottle skincare brand farsali made an absolute killing selling unicorn essence which sounds like something i've gathered in a quest in 2017 unicorn was the fourth most popular halloween costume in 2018 it was the third most popular and the unicorn trend isn't unique mythical beasts and symbols are caught in a cycle of going in and out of fashion but unicorns differ from other popular beasts because of their transcendent rather than familiar relationship to humans they're not usually pets not lovers and not adversaries yet they still make occasional appearances in media and popular culture despite their distance riding a unicorn for example is such an

absurd image it's basically a meme a dream shared only by horse girls and
napoleon dynamite yet riding a dragon is
treated far more seriously so to speak and when it comes to branded named
unicorns in american media many of us
might first think of my little pony characters and to be honest i couldn't
remember if they had horns or not until i looked it up apparently some of
horns
and some don't much like their 1980s predecessors the 2016 movie gets into
some second-class citizen territory on
this topic after all these are my little ponies not my little unicorns
and unicorns are still often cast as helpful enchanted sidekicks and other
kids titles
think lady rainicorn from adventure time or swiftwin from she-ra this lack
of overtly branded unicorns is
interesting considering how unicorn is also a business term meaning a
company valued at over a billion dollars
but like the snack foods name for them unicorns seem to be
overwhelmingly associated with whimsy magic dreams
rainbows friendship themes we see a lot of in contemporary kids media
they're a chance to escape to
use jess weiner's words and they're not really what many people think of
when it comes to darkness horror or death
okay we've talked a lot about the sugary suicide squad year that was 2017.
let's scoop back in time to the mid 20th
century when fantasy themed media was quietly thriving as a genre
[Music]
in 1962 when peter s beagle was just 23 he took a summer retreat to a cabin
in
connecticut with a friend while there he drafted the beginnings of the last
unicorn this draft would later be published as
the last unicorn the lost journey in 2006. but beagle struggled with the story
despite the success he'd gotten from
publishing a fine and private place several years prior i read the lost journey
while preparing for this video and it's honestly
wonderful despite the fact that it's incomplete the story takes place in the
mid 20th century and the unicorn teams up with a

sarcastic two-headed demon who was kicked out of hell i'd recommend checking it out you can even see which passages were lifted directly from this early draft and later used for the final edition in 1968 after intensely struggling with the manuscript beagle would finally publish the last unicorn he went on to write many more stories after that some of them also involving unicorns in fact in 2005 beagle published an official sequel in the form of a short story titled two hearts it follows an entirely new protagonist though some of the characters from the original book do make appearances and drop by to help beagle was eventually successful in finding someone interested in buying the rights to his story sometime in the mid-1970s after buying the rights to the book the last unicorn's associate producer michael chase walker struck a deal with rank and bass productions to make the film adaptation peter beagle was originally not happy about this saying in a 2011 interview in animation magazine the reason i was so horrified at the notion of franken bass making the film was that i didn't like anything of theirs that i'd ever seen however according to walker rankin bass was second to last on their list of companies that might make the movie with hannah barbera being the absolute last choice if you're from the united states you're probably familiar with rankin bass already especially if your taste in holiday films skews classic the stop-motion holiday movies of the mid-20th century like rudolph the red-nosed reindeer jack frost the easter bunny has come into town and 18 other titles were all produced by rank and bass from 1960 until the mid-1980s most of these projects were outsourced to japan for filming with the company taking advantage of lower labor costs overseas and by the mid-1970s rank and bass had settled on one animation studio in particular they could take on almost all their stop-motion and animation projects the last unicorn was one of the final projects completed by topcraft a japanese animation studio contracted by rank and bass to make the film

if the stylization of the movie seems familiar to you especially its character designs then you might have seen some of topcraft's other feature-length films also produced by rank and bass the hobbit the return of the king and flight of the dragons compared to other japanese animation studios topcraft was well equipped to take on feature film projects as it possessed high quality studios and one of the few 35 millimeter multiplane cameras in tokyo at the time as for its non-american projects topcraft had a resume of titles spanning the 1970s and 1980s including work both on anime episodes and feature length projects but perhaps the company's most memorable contribution to the world of animation came shortly before its collapse in the mid-1980s a little movie called nausicaa of the valley of the wind following top crop's bankruptcy in 1985 hayao miyazaki scooped up what remained of the studio after dismissing most of the staff and renamed it studio ghibli topcraft's high quality work is evident in the last unicorn's 70 thousand or so cells and richly hand-painted backgrounds and while most western animated movies including disney are shot at 24 frames per second the last unicorn is mostly shot at 12 frames per second this is more common in anime and it involves shooting the same frame twice a technique called on twos animation that uses 24 frames per second shoots on ones and certain scenes of the last unicorn were filmed on ones employing the more labor-intensive but more fluid style of animating when the scene called for it this is probably why the movie seems kind of anime kind of not the last unicorn is also a highly referential work and i did want to briefly mention character designs here while most of the characters are designed around the same aesthetic we see in other topcraft productions made for rank and bass the lady amalthea's design in particular stands out according to the audio commentary on the

enchanted edition blu-ray the movie's american producers weren't thrilled with how young and anime Amalthea's original design came across in early concept art so she got a redesign albeit one that still makes her stand out not only in this movie but also against any other female character in other Rank and Bass movies more than anything her design seems to borrow heavily from the main character of the *Belladonna of Sadness* a 1973 Japanese psychedelic film about violence sex and revenge but i'm getting too deep into anime history which can't be a good sign let's

talk about the production Peter Beagle was no stranger to animated adaptations of high fantasy he'd actually written the screenplay for Ralph Bakshi's *The Lord of the Rings* back in 1978 not to be confused with the aforementioned Rank and Bass adaptations of *The Hobbit* and *The Return of the King* this project while reportedly a difficult and low-paying job according to Beagle helped him prepare for the task of drafting the screenplay to his own novels adaptation in the early 1980s

Rank and Bass shuttered most of their production company in 1987 and wouldn't make another traditionally animated theatrical feature film until their 1999 musical adaptation of *The King and I* which received terrible reviews and did horribly at the box office Rank and Bass officially ceased operations in 2001 we killed itchy and scratchy good riddance the Rankin Bass foray in a fantasy in the late 1970s and early 1980s is unsurprising the genre was seeing mainstream success at the time though it took a much darker adult form than the medieval whimsy of Disney movies of years past

this might have something to do with the spike in popularity of sword and sorcery fantasy films which leaned more into action than they did elf politics or whatever in addition to the last Unicorn 1982 also saw the release of two other dark fantasy movies made for kids *The Secret of NIM* and *The Dark Crystal*

both these films are also proud members of the back when 80s films were weird and scary club

but something about this genre still clearly resonates with people as the dark crystal recently saw a mini-series

reboot released on netflix in 2019 flight of the dragons also a rank and bass topcraft animated fantasy film from 1982 also involved a mythical creature human transformation as its central

tension come anatomy astronomy biology chemistry

geology geometry mathematics meteorology mineralogy oceanography paleontology

physics psychology sociology

[Music]

hell even the rat decided it wanted a piece of the spooky fantasy pie with its release of the black cauldron in 1985.

unfortunately the film didn't do very well and to this day it's one of disney's bastard films with the company

barely acknowledging its existence even as a cult classic speaking of disappointments the last

unicorn cost five million dollars to make and made back less than seven million at the box office making for an

underwhelming performance as a point of comparison the secret of nim had a budget of 7 million and made back close

to 15 million as for critical reviews it lost marks for the animation itself according to the rotten tomatoes consensus the last unicorn lacks the fluid animation to truly sparkle

the av club perhaps picking up on the fact that the unicorn was sometimes animated on twos comments that she comes

across weightless and overly simplified and variety magazine liked the movie

overall but called the unicorn's design vapid even in the 80s your art teachers hated anime have you heard of hatsune

miku but most critics praised the film for its voice cast which featured mia pharaoh as the unicorn alan arkin as

schmendrick angelo lansbury as mommy fortuna and tammy grimes as molly grew the relatively unknown jeff bridges and

his eagerness to be part of the project offered to voice prince lear pro bono i practically got the whole poem now if

you wanted to look at it i'm the dude so that's what you call me you know that or his dudeness or uh duder or you know el duterino if you're not into the whole brevity thing bridges acted alongside christopher lee as king haggard luckily christopher lee was fluent in german and he offered to also do the voice for king haggard in das lester einhorn

[Music]

critics also liked the music which was written by jimmy webb the first few songs in the movie were performed by the rock band america with the final two songs one of them a love ballad sung by the characters

the animators who had access to the music before they began work on the movie incorporated the lyrics into their

visuals this is especially true of some of the background elements like animals and landscape

speaking of backgrounds that just about wraps up the background of this film let's finally talk about the story itself

[Music]

okay so with the backstory of this film out of the way let's go over some of the main components of the plot i want to also bring up anything that might have

certain significance in the book though i don't want to focus too much on book versus movie besides someone else already made a video that covers all

that okay so i'll just watch this a few more times take notes okay and read all of this uh that's a

lot and when you brush your teeth tonight use this cherry at toothbrush seriously we're treated to several background

paintings in the film's opening beagle writes of an unnamed unicorn who lives in a lilac wood but the movie takes some

liberties in how it plays with background color in these opening scenes most of the movie has a rather dark earthy palette but these scenes are full of highly saturated hues that illustrate how it is always spring in the unicorn's forest

two hunters wander into her forest and debate the existence of unicorns with the elder hunter calling out into the

quiet stillness stay where you are poor beast this is no world for you keep
your trees green and your friends
protected and good luck to you for you are the last then we finally see
the unicorn who is understandably upset by the news that her kind are
basically extinct without her ever having realized
it while the unicorn is musing over the fate of her species she encounters a
singing butterfly she begs him to tell
her if he's familiar with unicorns and what might have happened to them the
butterfly who looks like a 60s beatnik is actually modeled after beagle
himself
you can find the others if you are brave they passed down all the roads long
ago and the red bull ran close behind them
and covered their footprints the red bull what is the red bull
his first thing bull has majesty and his horns are the horns of a wild ox
with them he shall push the unicorns all of them to the ends of the earth the
unicorn decides to leave her forest
and try to find others like her it's here that she finally encounters a human
who mistakes her for a horse and tries to catch her she realizes that
human beings don't recognize her for who she is or perhaps they've
forgotten unicorns altogether
there are at least some humans who recognize her though including an old
witch named mommy for tuna she captures
the unicorn and imprisons her in a cage where she is kept as an attraction in
a traveling carnival of mythical creatures
because humans can't recognize unicorns anymore mommy fortuna
bewitches her with a false horn but luckily for the unicorn
the witch has employed a bumbling but pure-hearted magician named
schmendrick who makes a few sad attempts at magic to release her
once she is released the unicorn gets to work releasing all the other animals
who have also been disguised with magic
okay now it's time for arguably the most traumatic scene for a lot of people
the
unicorn also frees a harpy who is immortal like herself and not under any
kind of spell she's scary as and she die bombs
mommy for tuna and kills her [Applause]
[Music]

luckily schmedrick and the unicorn managed to escape briefly i should mention that in the book schmendrick's situation is a little more fleshed out because he's literally so atrocious at magic he's been cursed with immortality until he can finally get better it's like a warlock performance improvement plan speaking of schmendrick being kind of a goober he and the unicorn are soon captured by a group of traveling bandits led by a braggadocious outlaw named captain cully schmendrick in a stroke of luck is able to distract them with a spell that conjures up mirages of the robin hood legend but while most of the bandits run after these apparitions captain cully isn't deceived and he has schmedrick tied to a tree who's ready for more weird drama oh

[Music] i love you

schmendrick escapes thanks to the unicorn and the two hit the road again but they're intercepted by one of the bandits a woman named molly grew molly instantly recognizes the unicorn for who she is and starts to cry where have you been where have you been damn you where have you been and where were you 20 years ago 10 years ago where were you when i was new when i was one of those innocent young maidens you always come to

so this next part is probably where the book and movie deviate the most in the book the travelers have to pass through hags gate before they can get to hagrid's castle hagsgate is a village at the foot of the castle and the trio are surprised that the town is so well kept and peaceful but when they join some of the town's people for dinner in the local tavern they learn that hagsgate has been hexed with a curse that their village will thrive with excellent harvest seasons and abundant resources and money but the catch is that a child born from the village will one day go on to bring its doom schmedrick proceeds to get blasted and say some dumb to the townspeople all of whom are middle-aged or older as they all decided to stop having children to prevent the prophecy from coming true

not sure what the long-term strategy was there and it didn't really work out
because one child was born in secret and
then abandoned before being adopted by the king but i digress back to the
movie one
night close to haggard's castle the party is finally confronted with the red
bull terrified the unicorn begins to flee but
it quickly becomes clear that the bull is faster than her in a panic
schmendrick cast a spell but whoops now
she has thumbs the unicorn freaks out but the three decide to continue on
their quest with the unicorn's now human
body possibly protecting her from the bull for the time being they finally
reach the castle which
seems to only be populated by two people king haggard himself and his
adopted son lear
schmedrick introduces the unicorn as his niece lady amalthea and while
haggard is skeptical he agrees to let the trio stay
in his castle for a while but not until after he fires the extremely pissed dude
schmendrick is replacing come on old man
i'll write you a reference naturally lear falls in love with amalthea and he
attempts to win her
affections by slaying dragons and as he puts it doing great deeds as time
wears on amalthea and lyric grow
closer and amalthea begins to forget her life as a unicorn she even forgets
why she came to hagrid's castle in the first
place this change isn't lost on hagrid himself at one point he confronts
amalthea
essentially accusing her betraying her true identity and making him out to
be a fool but eventually he realizes that
amalthea the woman has almost entirely replaced whatever unicorn there
once was
i said to the red bull i must have them i must have all of them all there are
for nothing makes me happy but they're shining
and their grace each time i see the unicorns
my unicorns it is like that morning in the woods and i am truly young
in spite of myself [Music]
you are the last my lord i do not understand thanks to molly gru's charming

conversation with a scullery cat she and schmendrick begin to crack the riddle around how to find the red bull's lair which lies beneath haggard's castle i should mention that amalthea doesn't really help them at all and it's at this point in the movie that her role becomes pretty passive anyway they descend to the dungeon and find a goofy skeleton which was part of the cat's riddle answer the riddle then tell us the way say please please no no the skeleton mocks him at first but schmedrick is able to trick him into explaining the answer to the riddle by promising him wine but despite his inebriation the skeleton suddenly recognizes amalthea and flips out calling for haggard they all run into the clock which is the entrance to the passage with hagrid behind them but instead of following them inside he smashes the clock trapping them lear is there too having followed amalthea when she left with the others to descend into the dungeon amalthea begins to have doubts about the whole mission as she no longer remembers who she is and doesn't have any interest in becoming a unicorn again but lear disagrees telling her that it's her destiny to rescue the others the red bull begins to stir and presumably the spell on amalthea is no longer as effective at disguising her as the group tries to flee amalthea trips and falls and yet again in a moment of desperation schmendrick mutters a few magic words now back in her original body the unicorn runs out of the cave and onto the beach where the red bull follows her he tries driving her into the sea where the other unicorns were driven long ago but as the bull chases her lear throws himself in his path the unicorn seeing this undergoes a sudden change rather than soberly trudge into the breaking waves she instead rears up and edges closer toward the bull she forces the bull into the sea which prompts the crashing waves to unleash thousands of unicorns onto the beach the stampede causes haggard's castle to collapse and king haggard with it

in the book this unicorn exodus also destroys hagsgate as a final act of grace the unicorn resurrects her dead boyfriend then gallops away before he wakes up in the last scene of the movie the unicorn appears to schmedrick again to thank him before she leaves him and molly and begins the long journey back to her lilac forest

okay let's go back to my earlier comment about how mortality is a major component of this film well of course death is a component of this film doesn't almost every type of narrative carry the threat of some kind of death be it physical or even metaphorical i'm sure there are kids films way darker than this one but what has always made the last unicorn stand out to me is its framing of mortality sure other kids movies approach the subject of the inevitability of death but in the world of the last unicorn death isn't exactly inevitable the unicorn is not just magical she's outright immortal in the book beagle writes she was very old though she did not know it

to be clear while lots of kids movies depict grief that's not exactly what i'm talking about here the last unicorn lays bare the frightening reality of one's own death and not one that is necessarily followed by an afterlife or if there is an afterlife it might be a sub-optimal one barely resembling the experience of life and this is why it's such an effective memento mori piece memento mori is a latin phrase that basically means remember you will die it underscores some of the art in literature from the middle ages through the renaissance and the enlightenment especially through the lens of christianity its philosophical purpose was to encourage people especially christians to be mindful of the temporal natures of their lives and to instead focus on the divine and the eternal i.e god while none of the characters in the film make any kind of overt reference to the christian afterlife they do seem extremely concerned with their legacy while other villains and plenty of non-villains thirst for money power and even fame many of the antagonists in the

last unicorn are obsessed with what they will leave behind and how they will be remembered many of them shamelessly show off and brag not necessarily because they want fans or money in this life but because they are concerned with the lingering memory of their names and identities even false ones early on in the movie when the unicorn is traveling on man's road she's almost captured by a man who mistakes her for a horse not only does he consider her obviously beautiful but he's already thinking about how he can exploit her for his own benefit and then the unicorn is trapped and forced into a carnival less than 10 minutes later side note but in reality barnum and bailey and ringling brothers had a real unicorn in their circus shows in 1985. it was a goat with a surgically altered horn mommy fortuna is especially concerned with her own legacy she recognizes that what she's doing is selfish and dangerous but it doesn't matter to her especially when humans are destined to die anyway the harpy and the unicorn are both immortal creatures and because mommy fortuna captured them she knows that both beasts will remember her thus extending her legacy and name into eternity oh she'll kill me one day or another but she will remember forever that i caught her but i held a prisoner so there's my immortality eh in the essay the dialect of mortality and immortality and peter s beagle's the last unicorn jeffrey reiter claims that mommy fortuna's hope for immortality is to be remembered forever to imprint her name upon the souls of the immortal beings she encounters that is precisely mommy fortuna's problem she selfishly seeks to cling to her immortality so much so that it literally kills her the book makes mommy fortuna's thirst for fame through immortal creatures even more apparent but she much like molly grew actually harbors a hint of shame when she looks back at her wasted life do you think i don't know what the true witchery is just because i do what i do

there's not a witch in the world hasn't laughed at mommy fortuna and her
homemade horrors but there's not one of
them who would have did she participates in the carnival herself playing the
personification of old age a legend
borrowed from norse mythology this disturbs the unicorn quite a bit and she
finds herself gripped with fear the fear
of transients and a temporary body that will wither in age schmentrich and
molly are the more
humble of human characters unlike the film's antagonists schmedrick is
incompetent and he's more than aware of
it my dear you deserve the services of a great wizard but i'm afraid you'll
have to be glad of the aid of a second-rate
pickpocket
and molly considers herself to be far past her prime and therefore in a way
tainted by her age and experiences the
unicorn in contrast is limited in what she can and can't feel i can never
regret
i can feel sorrow but it's not the same thing and while the unicorn claims
she can feel no
regret it is schmendrick and mali who carry their regrets and their shame
with them throughout their human lives
meanwhile captain cully is maybe the best example of a character who is
concerned with fame for superficial reasons he assumes schmendrick is
already familiar with his troop and seems totally content with indulging in
his delusions in the book cully is even more of a fame
obsessed buffoon he's convinced that schmendrick is actually a famous
folklorist in disguise and he's
desperate to show off so that he might be written about favorably my main
goal is to blow up and then act like i don't
know nobody but it's also kali who rejects legends and stories robin hood is
a myth
we are the reality beagle gave kelly some amazing lines in the book and
they all betray how self-absorbed kelly is
speaking to schmetrick about how he loves to write songs about himself
cully says one always hopes of course even now to
be collected to be verified annotated to have variant versions even to have
one's

authenticity doubted as jeffrey writer points out kelly seeks to become
immortal by imprinting himself
on the memories of future generations he crafts songs about himself
deliberately archaic and highly embellished in the
hopes that his deeds may live on and even if these verses were preserved
the cully of the songs bears no
resemblance to the real cowardly egomaniac cully so the true man would
gain no real immortality at all
and even cully is well aware of the fact that the songs and poems he writes
about himself are not accurate representations
of the truth but the ends justify the means according to kelly men have to
have heroes but no man can ever be as
big as the need and so a legend grows around a grain of truth like a pearl
and there's at least one character who certainly doesn't rise to the need to fit
his title interestingly enough king
hanger doesn't really seem concerned with fame or glory he's already king
so i suppose he's reached the end of the
line as far as power is concerned and schmedrick has already heard so many
stories about him this might explain why
almost nothing brings him happiness and why he spends his old age staring
into the sea immortal creatures trapped
within a dark abyss but it's his son lear who strictly follows what one might
consider the codes of chivalry
rather than feeling concerned with how he specifically might be
remembered by future generations lear looks to the
past to knights and nobles who came before him to inform his behavior in
the present he's kind of the epitome of
lawful good doing what he thinks is the right thing based on the legacy of
others morals and good deeds he seems to
buy into the same conviction as captain kelly that men have to have heroes
but perhaps unlike cully he believes that it
is possible for a single person to rise to the right occasion and it's no wonder
that lear is so concerned with this given the film's
setting idealized and honorable behavior helped inform much of the art and
poetry produced in western europe during the middle ages the movie itself
even makes

references to art history like the references to the hunt of the unicorn at the beginning of the film the movie version edited out the hunters replacing them instead with a split background in an editorial titled fantasy and medieval iconography in the last unicorn

noelle taberham argues that this is meant to illustrate the split in the unicorn psyche from her old life in her forest to her human one in haggard's castle speaking of haggard's castle when

amalthea is beginning to succumb to her new human form she retreats to a roomful of paintings of unicorns though most men may have forgotten unicorns they clearly live on in art tabraham even makes a connection between the scene following the unicorn's transformation and la pieta or the compassion at first i thought this was a little bit of a stretch but now i'm not so sure if the christ metaphor is as wacky as i originally thought the unicorn temporarily assumes a human form

after all despite her clearly superior existence and is forced to reckon with the truth of her own mortality and the scene is pretty long so the audience has time to mourn for the unicorn as molly cradles her in her arms

later her sacrifice of her human form frees thousands of her fellow creatures also adaptations of la pieta are apparently a thing okay so the connection between unicorns and christianity is something you can find across medieval art in history but in the context of the unicorn tapestries many art historians see these tapestries as allegories for the crucifixion with the mystical unicorn being lured to the lap of a virgin only to be slaughtered by a group of hunters the unicorn's body is brought back to a castle where it will likely be used for medicinal purposes by the nobility who live there

after all humans attempting to kill them to seize immortality for themselves is also a trope attached to unicorns that persist to this day christian themes define medieval memento mori art and literature as well during a time when life expectancy was pretty bad and living conditions even for the wealthy were not guaranteed to provide comfort memento mori kind of

served as
a christian rebranding of the philosophy of stoicism through its symbols this
style of art and literature warned
people of the mortal world not to get too attached to their earthly existence
and to remember that divine eternity
awaited them be it divine bliss or divine punishment it's actually due in part
to the
protestant reformation that we saw art of unicorns fall out of fashion going
into the 15th century unicorns had been
used as symbols for christ and protestant reformers weren't keen on the idea
of iconography which played a big
role in catholic tradition but the 1563 council of trent decreed that symbolic
depictions of christ were
unacceptable unless approved by bishops and thus we saw unicorns begin to
fade in europe but unlike many myths and
legends that have been lost to time over centuries the unicorn remained in
the public consciousness thought of by most
as a rare creature that did actually exist and that might have powers but it
wasn't really regarded as a divine
metaphor as much speaking of symbols and metaphors some quick trivia
the name of malthia is
borrowed from the first named unicorn of greek mythology hidden from his
father kronos the infant zeus nursed from a
goat named amalthea on the island of crete one day he broke off one of the
goat's horns thus her being a unicorn he
blessed the horn and called it a cornucopia or horn of abundance and to this
day it represents plentiful food
and good harvest remember the scary-ass harpy that everyone credits is
wrecking knights of sleep for countless kids her name celeno
like amalthea is also a reference to greek mythology though fittingly a
much darker one according to virgil's aeneid
celino is a prophet herself warning aeneas that his men will starve before
they reach the end of their journey as
punishment for killing her sisters but it's the unicorn who prophesizes doom
in the film
your death sits in that cage and she hears you this isn't the only time death is
so overtly brought up in the movie

its darkness sneaks into other scenes reminding both characters and the audience of the approaching horizon of death i would not be you for all the world you have let your doom in by the front door but it will not depart that way and yeah prophecies about death and doom aren't exactly unique to the last unicorn either that alone would hardly make it an effective piece of memento mori but the film also employs classic visual cues found in art going back centuries the drunk skull in haggard's dungeon is probably the most glaring example of traditional memento mori in the film this is even more obvious in the book when the skull complains when i was alive i believed as you do that time was at least as real and solid as myself and probably more so i said one o'clock as though i could see it and monday as though i could find it on the map and i let myself be hurried along from minute to minute day to day year to year as though i were actually moving from one place to another like everyone else i lived in a house bricked up with seconds and minutes weekends and new year's days and i never went outside until i died because there was no other door now i know that i could have walked through walls of course walking through walls is referencing the fact that to solve the riddle schmendrick and molly just needed to figure out that they needed to physically walk through haggard's big weird clock to get to the red bull's lair to reach the red bull you have to walk through time a clock is in time it's just numbers and springs pay it no mind just walk right on through about that wine now speaking of which clocks are another example of memento mori and art with clocks from the middle ages often inscribed with macabre reminders clocks and other indications of time are not uncommon in memento mori art plus hagrid also has the biggest most gargoyle-covered clock i'm sure he could

find which makes the whole effect even more dark and sinister
while i've talked a lot about this film's heavier moments i want to focus now
on what has always been the most chilling line of any film to me
it happened shortly after schmendrick turns the unicorn into a human when
she wakes up and pulls away from molly's
embrace the gravity of her new existence suddenly becomes terrifyingly
obvious and immutable i wish you would let the
red bull take me i wish you had left me to the harpy
i can feel this body dying all around me her screams echo martin heidegger
man
dies constantly until the moment of his demise i don't want to pivot to
talking about heidegger and being towards death here
because quite frankly i'm not smart enough but it does provide a compelling
framework for understanding what the
unicorn is feeling in extremely basic terms heidegger's view was that
awareness of one's own unique death was
essential to authentic human experience and that enlightened individuals or
those who face this reality as death is
the only thing in a person's life that is guaranteed to happen and this scene
is the only time i can
really think of that a young protagonist in a kid's movie suddenly realizes
that their time on earth is limited and that
their body will begin to decay again this isn't to say that protagonist death
isn't something handled by other
kids movies but in this case amalthea's death is both distant to us and
unbearably close to her
this is heavy stuff for a kid to grapple with and in a way it's even harder for
adults after all isn't the horizon of
death closer to us than it is to them is it
terrifying no i don't think so it's the way it is you know
everything must come to an end the drip finally stops
see you on the other side oh bojack no there is no other side
this is it the unicorn's realization of her impending death called mortal
salience
if you go by terror management theory is even more pronounced in the
book in beagle's text her fate is foreshadowed

by a tale shmetric telsar about how his master once turned a unicorn into a human man so that he could escape
hunters the man lived a noble and happy life and he died peacefully in old age but the
unicorn is sharply critical of this tale saying the magician did him no service but great ill
how terrible it would be if all my people had been turned human by well-meaning wizards exiled trapped in
burning houses i would sooner find that the red bull had killed them all to her it's worse to be trapped in a
human body a burning house aware of the horizon of death and obsessed with leaving some smudge of legacy on the
world than it is to be outright killed in the movie and certainly in the book the unicorn holds human beings in a kind
of pitying contempt molly even gently scolds her for this saying she wishes the unicorn could experience what it's
like to be mortal and schmendrick cursed with immortality he never wanted in the first place explains i know something
that a unicorn cannot know whatever can die is beautiful more beautiful than a unicorn who lives forever and who is the
most beautiful creature in the world schmendrick's gentle correction comes from his own sorrow at being immortal
against his will it's not clear exactly how old he is but he proclaims proudly that he is the last
of his own kind as well perhaps he has been carrying his own grief for many years
the book relies much more heavily on the theme of beauty as linked to the unicorn's immortality than the movie does
for example in the book when the unicorn is first turned into a human she cries i would have chosen any other than this
for my prison a rhinoceros is as ugly as a human being and it too is going to die but at least it never thinks that it is
beautiful this body is dying i can feel it rotting all around me how can anything that is going to die be real
how can it be truly beautiful but the film does offer its characters the ability to make sense of their lives

and their purpose so that they don't descend into the kind of despair that haunts the lady amalthea while the antagonists are concerned with fame manufactured or not the protagonists accept that they must follow set paths doing things the way they ought to be done according to custom into history which after all is its own kind of legacy albeit one forged by others that came before consider how the unicorn despite the danger around being captured never strays from the main road she follows there's even a whole song dedicated to it she sleeps literally right off the side of the road and it's because of this that she has captured and probably why schmendrick is captured later on they don't depart from the given path and they also don't depart from what they believe to be their own fairy tale lear is the most self-aware out of all of them when it comes to understanding what he should do within this context it dictates his every action in the movie right down to writing poetry that he clearly doesn't enjoy and isn't good at but it's what chivalry requires of him and therefore he does it without ever questioning and once amalthea gets with the program she recognizes this in lear and she falls in love with him in fact during their duet amaltia is singing the lines from her earlier ballad now that i'm a woman as lear sings to her she warbles everything has changed but by the end of the song she looks to him and sings now i know the way the path she'd been following the entire movie led her not just to the location of her people but also to the human man she feels destined to fall in love with and this connection with tradition and chivalry kind of makes lear a jerk well of course you're of noble birth anybody can see that i mean you can't really be that that ridiculous magician's niece gets out of the question like schmendrick is the whole reason that malthia exists as a human in the first place her noble birth is her waking up fully grown in a swamp and it's lear's connection to the hero myth this chivalrous path that binds him to his own mortality [Music]

i am a hero and heroes know that things must happen when it is time for them to happen
a quest may not simply be abandoned unicorns may go unrescued for a long time but
not forever the happy ending cannot come in the middle of the story do something you
have the power i will kill you if you don't do something i cannot not all the magic in
the world can help her now then what is magic for that's what heroes are for of course that is exactly what heroes are for kind of sucks that he would effectively doom another creature to a life of
immortality never to feel true love again amaltia states that everything dies essentially justifying the
necessity of her own mortality she's offering both to sacrifice her immortality for lear while also
willingly choosing a life for herself that will guarantee her the ability to feel romantic love something she can't
experience as a unicorn both lear and amalthea rely on teleology to justify what they want both appealing
to the natural order of things but a malthus destiny perhaps determined by magic at the hands of schmendrick is
inescapable in fact freeing the other unicorns takes a bit of a back seat after the first half of the movie while nightmares of
her kind being chased by the red bull plagued the unicorn once she finds herself in a mortal body she doesn't really consider their plight or why someone anyone should free them in the first place perhaps the heaviness of her mortality pushes her towards selfishness or
perhaps she simply finds it difficult to empathize with creatures who will live forever be it on land or in the sea
and immortal creatures like unicorns have no need for stories legacies myths or fairy tales but these fairy tales
take me away from the harsh reality of peasant life according to the book they typically live alone in their forests
the red bull may have covered their footprints when he chased them into the sea but did they have anything that they were leaving behind in the first place

the book also contains an interesting line from schmendrick who while arguing with amalthea in the red bull's lair asks is the world any the worst for losing the unicorns and would it be any better if they were running free again one good woman more in the world is worth every single unicorn gone let it end marry the prince and live happily ever after and this leads me to my next question what's really at stake if the unicorn of the story never saves her people she was forced into it because of schmendrick's magic but surely there must be something to account for why an immortal creature would when faced with a short human life choose to embrace that life in the book there's even a line about how she mourns more for the human girl who could never be brought back than she does for fear the human life she saw stretching out before her meeting the horizon of certain death had been rerouted i'm no longer like the others for no unicorn was ever born who could regret but now i do i regret now while all of this is the result of that one line of amaltius that always stuck with me i'd like to end on one last section from the book in my opinion it's the most haunting and terrifying thing to come out of either the book or the movie the unicorn in her immortality is living a truly sublime experience when she leaves the comfort of her forest and is privy to the vastness of the world and the deep relationships of the people in it in this scene the unicorn schmendrick and mali stop to rest beagle writes she would feel herself bending under the heaviness of knowing their names then she would run until morning to ease the ache swifter than rain swift as loss racing to catch up with the time when she had known nothing at all but the sweetness of being herself often then between the rush of one breath and the reach of another it came to her that schmedrick and molly were long dead and king haggard as well and the red bull met and mastered so long ago that the grandchildren of the stars that had seen it all happen

were withering now turning to coal and that she was the only unicorn left in the world

what you're afraid of is the unknown [Music] don't be afraid

but i am afraid the running's over

it's time to rest

give me your hand but i don't want to die

trust me

[Music]

you see no shock no

engulfment no tearing asunder what you feared would come like an

explosion is like a whisper

it probably feels like the stars have all withered and died since the

beginning of this long ass video but to close i wanted to return to the comment

made by one of the hunters at the beginning of the story this is no world for you it reminds me of another line said by an

erotic dragon character in the rough draft of the book the lost journey the dragon mocks the unicorn claiming that

hers is a myth that was always more trouble than it was worth he's certainly speaking through the lens of a 20th century cynicism a cynicism that in my opinion has only intensified over the decades books are stupid i thought books were smart no they're stupid for all of

its legacy magic and even divinity is the unicorn truly an immortal creature does it fulfill some kind of present-day societal need does its myth represent some kind of lingering anxiety

while the last unicorn may live on in people's memories as a scary or whimsical or campy or brilliant animated

movie it focuses on a myth of the unicorn that was already waning and had been for a very long time like i

mentioned earlier unicorns are almost exclusively confined to the realm of children's media especially since the launch of my little pony toys in 1982 the same year the last unicorn was released and given the choice between a unicorn terrified by the emptiness of

her immortal existence and the sugary marketability of a smiling plastic pony who wouldn't want their kids to take the more positive path into fantasy worlds

the last unicorn's poor performance and relative lack of popularity isn't
really what i think of as the big shame here
nor is it that brand strategists equate unicorns with getting people to buy
stuff and just to be clear i for one am
not above the pink and the sparkles modern day unicorns aren't to my taste
but the aesthetics around them still
really get me oh hey is that princess unicorn i thought they were all sold out
they are now cool
my horn can pierce the sky what i think of as a big shame is how
although people ascribe so much darkness and despair to this movie which
it invariably has
it's fundamentally about overcoming the anxiety around death it explores
why the idea of myth and
legacy and even music and art history are so important not just to medieval
european culture but to modern fans of
fantasy and animation in his book on death anxiety ernest becker claims
this is the terror to have emerged from nothing to have a name
consciousness of self deep inner feelings and
excruciating inner yearning for life and self-expression and with all this yet
to
die the last unicorn is a film about springing into being becoming self-
aware
and developing an identity and wanting to express passion and creativity in
a way that other people who are just as
flawed and mortal as anyone else can find meaning in the unicorn's fate to
wander the earth remembering love and
feeling regret yet knowing she can never share these feelings with her
mythically perfect and innocent people is the cage
that truly traps her one that will persist long after her forest has vanished
and the stars in the sky have
burned themselves out [Music]
[Music]
so [Music]
you